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ABSTRACT

A staff development program in two western states helps professionals in rural school systems provide comprehensive transition services to students with disabilities. The program was designed to be relevant to rural constituents and to overcome the lack of understanding of local needs by university personnel. A vision statement relating to desired student outcomes was developed by staff members of Colorado State University in conjunction with local districts. Participants' strengths and needs were considered in the design of an internship experience and a 1-week summer institute. Other program elements were courses on transition and community-based instruction, vocational assessment, and career development, delivered in condensed format or via distance learning technology. Each participant designed an individual action plan incorporating their personal strengths and needs, the strengths and needs of their district, and the vision statement. The role of university personnel shifted as a result of district personnel needs. Perhaps the most important role of the university was that of providing credibility to the efforts of participating educators as they changed their own roles to become more acquainted with the community and less involved in traditional classroom activities. From this project a model has emerged for providing inservice and preservice training that addresses rural concerns. Evaluation showed that the district-university partnership is a real strength, although relationships longer than the current 1 year would be more effective. In some districts, administrators' lack of knowledge about laws concerning transition services resulted in lack of support. (TD)

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PARTNERS IN TRANSITION: EMPOWERING TEACHERS TO PROVIDE TRANSITION SERVICES

Facilitating a smooth transition from school to adult life for students with disabilities is a goal high schools are directed to perform by federal legislation (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1990). Meeting the letter of the law requires that teachers and administrators be knowledgeable and interested in this aspect of their work. However, several studies have shown that neither group is perceived as proficient in this arena (Lombard, Hazelkorn, & Neubert, 1992). In fact, Baer, Simmons, and Flexner (1996) concluded from their survey that school districts tend to comply with paperwork requirements of the law but are not actually providing adequate transition experiences for students with disabilities.

Reasons for the inadequacies are many. Historically, special education teachers, related services such as occupational therapy, and their respective administrations have had little training regarding the nature and procedures relative for quality transition services (Greene, Albright, Koska, & Beecham-Greene, 1991). Furthermore, resources needed to support students to enter jobs, learn to live independently, and develop relationships with local communities are meager at best. This paper describes one attempt to confront the need for professionals in rural school systems to provide comprehensive transition services. Through a collaborative effort between a university education department and a occupational therapy department, educators in rural school districts participated in staff development in the area of transition from school to adulthood. The objectives of this paper are to:

a. provide a general overview of a staff development program being implemented in rural school districts in two western states,
b. describe the role of university personnel that evolved during the course of the project and was defined by secondary school educators,
c. report specific strategies used to empower secondary educators as they identified how the transition process could best be integrated into their schools,
d. present a model for delivering inservice/preservice courses to rural settings developed as a result of this project,
e. evaluate the problems associated with the acceptance of this model.

Staff Development

The project staffs' decision to address problems associated with transition services in rural schools was based upon literature citing the importance of staff development efforts in rural settings. It is widely acknowledged that providing staff development is a key component for motivating teachers to remain in a school district (Helge, 1981, 1984, Westling & Whitten, 1996). Staff development for rural areas however, has been and continues to be problematic (Russell, Willis, & Gold, 1994). For instance, the distance between universities who provide training to educators and occupational therapists and schools in outlying areas often prevents frequent face-to-face contact and makes attending classes difficult, particularly during inclement weather seasons. Geographic distances also mean that the university faculty is not aware of local issues and politics that make implementing changes in schools difficult. It is therefore necessary

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for university faculty to understand the environmental factors that complicate the delivery of transition services in rural settings, such as limited job possibilities, no public transportation and the reality that vast expanses of geographic distances must be traversed in order to perform even the most mundane of tasks such as grocery shopping (Markve, Morris, Ferrara, & Rudrud, 1992). To accommodate educators' needs the following elements were considerations in the design of the PIT staff development program.

Table 1

Course	Content	Delivery Modality
Internship	• Developed based on self-assessment	Time: throughout the year Location: individual choice
Transition and Community-Based Instruction	• overview of transition • job development • teacher roles in transition • interagency collaboration • families • empowerment	Time: 2 weeks in summer Location: On campus
Vocational Assessment	• alternative assessment strategies • traditional assessment • collection of data • interpretation of information • planning process	Taught in a condensed format with a combination of face to face and self-study. Time: 2 weeks in summer or full spring semester Location: On and off campus Distance Education
Career Development Institute	• labor market issues • employment opportunities • employment services • experience in select businesses	Time: 2 weeks Location: On campus
Summer Institute: Rural Transition Issues	content derived from focus groups of project participants	Time: 1 week summer course Location: combination of campus and distance delivery

As shown in Table 1, the staff development program is comprised of five courses. Four of the courses; Internship, Transition and Community-Based Instruction, Career Development Institute, and Vocational Assessment were included in the program because not only does their content match the knowledge base identified as critical to transition services (Kohler, 1994),they can also be used by education staff to become credentialed vocationally. The fifth course, Summer Institute: Rural Transition Issues, was designed specifically to meet the needs of this project to address issues regarding the provision of transition services in rural communities.

Empowerment Strategies

Based upon the philosophy of empowerment, the Partners in Transition (PIT) model fosters the empowerment of educators to solve problems with the support of the university. This model is a derivative of the collaborative problem-solving model described in the consultation literature (Kurpius & Fuqua, 1993; Kurpius, Fuqua, & Rozecki, 1993; West & Idol, 1993). As

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discussed by Westling and Whitten (1996), recipients of training may themselves be the best sources for program development structure and content. The five strategies promoted by Smith and his colleagues were utilized to make the staff development program relevant to rural constituents and to overcome the lack of understanding of local needs by university personnel (Smith, 1996; Smith, Edelen-Smith, & Stodden, 1996). The strategies outlined by Smith, et. al. are similar to those employed in the PIT project;

1. developing a vision statement in conjunction with the local district to focus the group on the desired outcome of the training,
2. generating information from local groups regarding their staff development needs,
3. designing internship experiences based upon results of educators self evaluations,
4. development of coursework that culminates in action plans for district personnel, and
5. conducting regular networking meetings with educators to review their efforts relating to transition.

Operationalizing these strategies meant that the role of the university personnel involved in this project had to change. Tables 2, 3, 4, and 5 help to illustrate the process used in PIT to develop the supports, course delivery methods, and institute contents that were unique to one participating rural school district.

Vision Statement

The vision statement relates to the desired outcomes for students in the district. This statement provides a guide to the destination of the project (Senge, 1990). Following the development of the vision, it was the responsibility of university personnel to assist the project participants arrive at their destination.

Table 2

VISION STATEMENT
To prepare students to become valued members of the community by providing experiences, information and support that enables them to identify their futures in terms of living, work, recreation and social situations.

Skills Assessment

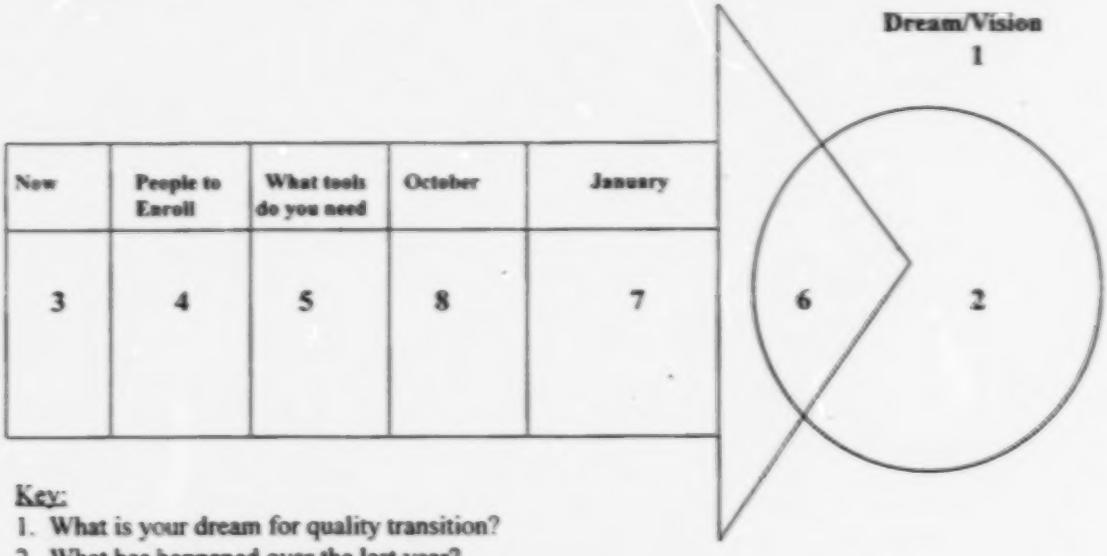
Using both a focus group format and an Individual Skills Assessment (Table 3), the needs of project participants were further defined. The skills assessment was used to help individual project participants tailor the internship experience to personal needs. They were counseled to evaluate their strengths and needs so that university advisors could design or identify internship experiences that would provide the most relevant and useful information. Thus, course instructors had to ensure that course content would complement areas of interest and need identified by participants. For instance, the Summer Institute for one rural district focused on three topics; team building, family involvement, and postsecondary options. Course content in the existing courses was altered to address primary concerns of participants. In fact, specific speakers and curriculum materials were selected to address concerns. There was less flexibility in the courses other that the Summer Institute and the Internship, because they are open to all students and not just those involved in the project.

The Individual Skills Assessment was designed in a 5-point Likert format. Participants were asked to rate their skills on a scale of 1-5. Table 3 lists the standards that are contained in the Individual Skills Assessment.

Individual Action Plan

Using the person centered planning concept, each participant was asked to design a plan incorporating their personal strengths and needs, the strengths and needs of their district and the vision statement that was developed by the cohort of project participants. This plan was designed using the planning process known as PATH (Pearpoint, O'Brien, & Forest, 1993), using a timeline of one year. This planning process consists of eight steps that begin with the individual identifying their vision or outcome first and then returning to the present and continuing to build the plan from what exists now out to the vision. Action Plans were reviewed to determine if they described activities that would lead to participants' vision for students. Figure 1 illustrates more fully the process by outlining the questions asked at each step and the format used to frame the plan.

Figure 1



Key:

1. What is your dream for quality transition?
2. What has happened over the last year?
3. As of today, looking at your present situation, describe transition.
4. Identify the people who can help with your vision.
5. What knowledge, skills, relationships, do you need?
6. What will you have accomplished by the end of the year?
7. What's going on now? What has happened since October?
8. Identify the steps taken, people who are supportive, what you've accomplished.

Adapted from Pearpoint, O'Brien, & Forest, 1993

Table 3

TRANSITION SKILLS ASSESSMENT

I. ASSESSMENT STANDARD

1. Systematic data collection using both formal and informal procedure.
2. Use of assessment results for program planning.
3. Maintains a process for communicating assessment information to involved parties.

II. INDIVIDUALIZED TRANSITION PLAN STANDARD

1. Convenes planning teams consisting of parents, school personnel, the student, and appropriate adult service providers.
2. Creates written individualized transition plans (ITP's).
3. Uses various person-centered planning strategies (e.g. MAPS, IPS, Futures Planning).

III. PREPARATION/TRAINING STANDARD

1. Modifies/enhances curriculums.
2. Uses a variety of instructional strategies.
3. Delivers functional curriculum in the following areas:
    a. Independent Living
    b. Recreation/Leisure
    c. Academic
    d. Vocational
    e. Community Access
    f. Social/Interpersonal
4. Promotes family and student empowerment and self determination.

IV. COLLABORATION STANDARD

1. Develops contacts and working relationships with Vocational Rehabilitation Services, Developmental Disabilities Services, Mental Health Services, JTPA, Division of Youth Services, Community Collages, Higher Education, etc.
2. Knows in-school resources such as counselors, psychologists, occupational therapists, vocational instructors, nurses, social workers, physical therapists, speech and language specialists, School to Work personnel, etc.

V. LEADERSHIP/MANAGEMENT STANDARD

1. Develops and communicates a shared vision for educating students with special needs.
2. Monitors and evaluates effectiveness of program.
3. Supervises paraprofessional staff.

University Personnel Roles

As shown in Table 4 the role of the University personnel involved in this project shifted as a result of district personnel needs. Empowering educators involves a willingness to include people as equals and begins a process of growth for all involved (Smith, Edelen-Smith, & Stodden, 1996; Smith & Stodden, 1994). The university role in this project became one of assisting districts to arrive at a plan during regular networking meetings. It was during these meetings, as well as during technical assistance visits, that the university became aware of resources needed by districts to continue working to infuse transition information procedures into their programs. Technical assistance also allowed project staff to support educators and to reassure them of the value of their efforts. Evaluating and reflecting upon the project was also in the purview of university staff. As shown in Table 5, a formal evaluation was used to understand how the process was faring. But perhaps the most important role of the university was that of providing credibility to the efforts of participating educators to their administrators and peers as they changed their own roles to become more acquainted with the community and less involved in traditional classroom activities. This role of university staff was the same as that of the "critical friend" described by Smith, et. al (1996). University personnel met with school principals, assisted with writing brochures to advertise programs, and connected schools with the state departments of education or other state offices that could assist them. Being a critical friend meant that the university was collaborating with the district. As a consequence of this partnership, members of the university team realized the importance of gaining schools' administrative support, and began advocating at the university for changes in the administration licensing programs to include more information about special needs and the change process.

Table 4

University Roles

Facilitate Planning
- orchestrate team visioning
- guide action planning
- schedule network meetings

Provide Resources
- offer technical assistance
- deliver courses
- evaluate project

Maintain Support
- provide credibility to school administration/peers
- advocate for changes in preservice education
- collaborate in identifying a training agenda

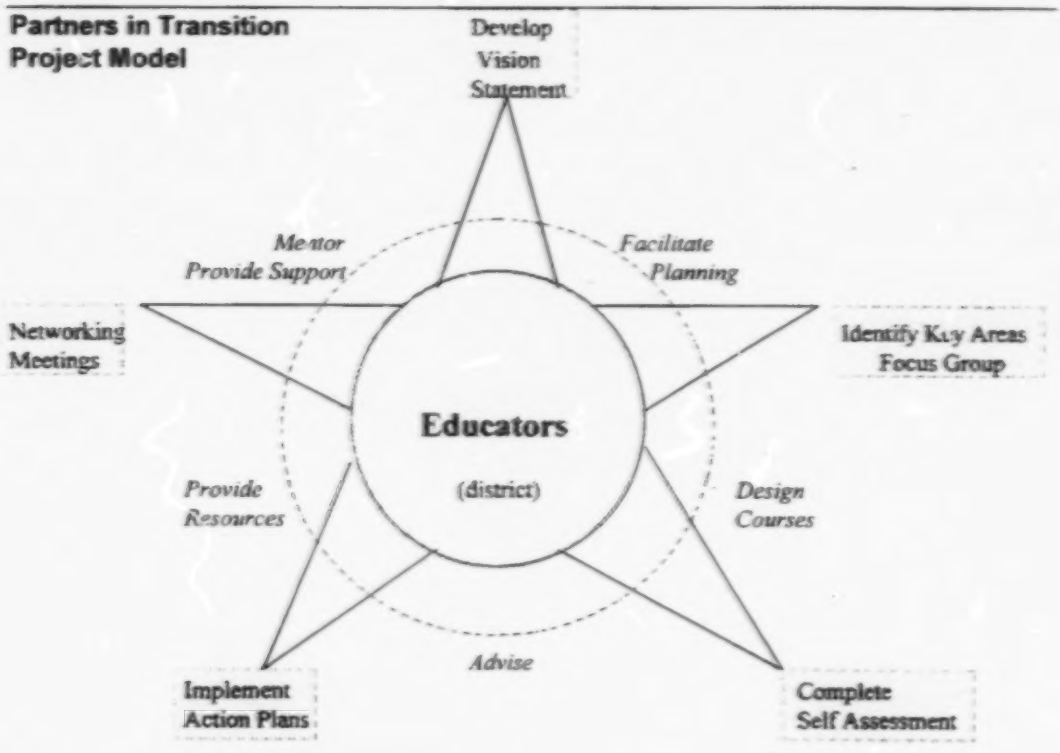
The Partners in Transition Model

From this project a model has emerged for providing inservice and preservice training Although this model is not confined to rural districts, it represents decisions made to address rural concerns. The model was originated to understand rural needs and to address problems such as understanding the context in which transition is occurring in local areas and creating a relationship between schools not in close proximity to institutions of higher education. Thus,

distance learning and condensed courses have become integrated into the Colorado State University course offerings. On a broader level, the model represents elements important to all types of programs effecting change (Fullan, 1993). See Figure 2.

Figure 2

Partners in Transition Project Model



Key: shaded areas pertain to educators
unshaded middle circle pertain to university personnel

Table 5

PARTNERS IN TRANSITION

Evaluation Survey

Questions were developed in the following project related areas that allowed participants to reflect on their experiences.

1. Courses
2. Internships
3. Networking
4. Technical Assistance
5. Administrative Support
6. Team Configurations
7. Special Education and Occupational Therapy

Evaluation

There have been many positive outcomes from this project. The development of a partnership between local districts and universities is powerful and a goal of most current education reform movements. Collaborating has enabled the program to understand the real issues prevalent in districts and local communities. It also pushes districts to look more globally for answers in finding ways to help their students receive a good education. But reflection over the past tree years has also shown this project staff weaknesses inherent in the model. These deficiencies can be attributed to university barriers, district-level barriers, and educator resistance. At the university, the short-term nature of the project was a problem; districts only received intense support during one year and then another district was recruited. Longer-term relationships would have increased the amount of change. Ideally, schools and universities could develop partnerships similar to those being promulgated in teacher Licensure programs, called professional development schools. This is more difficult at the graduate level (all courses offered during this project were graduate courses). Unfortunately, many of the activities such as technical assistance and network meetings were sponsored by the grant and not typical graduate program activities traditionally financed by universities.

In terms of the districts, clearly administrative support was an issue. In some districts even the special education administration was lacking in knowledge about the laws and mandates surrounding the area of transitional services. Therefore, they were not supportive of teachers teaching anything other than academics. In future projects, as recommended by Smith, et al. (1996), many constituents need to be involved in making public commitments to incorporating transition services. Project staff initially hoped occupational therapists would become key members on transition teams. But soon it became apparent that districts allotted OT time primarily to the elementary grades for "motor activities" and were not willing to reallocate some of this time to secondary programs. And finally, educators themselves posed resistance to necessary changes. Teachers often were unwilling to try a new strategy or forgive perceived slights remembered from years past in order to deliver transition services to students. They did not seem to want to be empower to make decisions. Some of these problems are surmountable but others reflect the reality of day-to- day operations that will probably always exist in local schools. Overall, however, this project succeeded in identifying and using strategies that foster the empowerment of educators wanting to improve their programs and the outcomes for students.

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